

Is it How to Grow a Garden or How a Garden Can Help You Grow?

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Did you know there are over 10,000 community gardens in the United States alone? In fact, our city of San Francisco is the proud owner of over 50 community gardens by itself (Community Gardening). A community garden is a plot of land owned by a city government, an organization, or in rare cases, an individual. The public then assumes the responsibilities of cleaning, organizing, managing, planting, and growing whatever they wish on that land. Some gardens grow food, others are just for display. Either way, they are open to the public and only have been known for positive impacts on the surrounding community. Community gardens improve people's quality of life by encouraging social interactions and self-reliance while producing food, conserving resources, beautifying neighborhoods, and reducing family



food budgets (Mission). By the end of this article you will not only be well informed about community gardens in general but also about the community gardens located locally in the San Francisco Bay Area. My hope is that this information may encourage you to get involved with a community garden either by volunteering your time, donating a few dollars here and there, or just by telling others about this simple, yet gratifying experience.

Planting, cultivating, and harvesting food by a community for the whole community is not a new concept.

In America, it can be traced back to the Indians, who grew and harvested all their crops in communal gardens. Yet, one could argue that community gardens officially got their start in American cities in the late 1800's, when cities were growing rapidly and people were out of



work. Cities offered its inhabitants plots of land so that they could

grow their own food. Liberty Gardens were introduced during World War I by the government to help contribute to the war effort by having families grow their own food. Relief Gardens were started during the Great Depression of the 1930's in the hopes of boosting people's spirits by providing them with food and work. The next evolution of community gardens were Victory Gardens during World War II. The government launched the Victory Garden campaign, which by 1944 had 20 million gardens producing 44% of America's fresh vegetables (History of Community Gardens in the U.S.).

Since then, community gardens have taken on many different purposes than just providing food in times of need. They are as diverse as the people that tend to them. Gardens spring up anywhere from an abandoned plot in the middle of an urban city to a suburban hospital, church, or school yard. These gardens can be one large community plot or many individual plots. Some are not meant to be anything more than a beautiful showcase for art while others are fully functioning food gardens. Many gardens are usually owned by local governments or non-profit organizations,

yet they are accessed and managed by the public (Community Gardening).

There are three main positive effects that community gardens have on the people and areas involved in them. The first, and most widely known effect is that the gardens are environmentally



friendly and aesthetically pleasing. Adding trees, flowers, and vegetables

to an area helps to “clean the air” so to speak, figuratively and literally. Many gardens are more like restoration projects. Using native plants, adding art, cleaning up a run down area, or making a park are common things to do with a community garden (History of Community Gardens).

The second positive effect is that these gardens help to create a sense of community between people that normally would not have had the opportunity to work together. They provide a safe haven where people from diverse backgrounds are able to break down cultural barriers and work together towards a shared goal. (History of Community Gardens In the U.S.). Some common locations for community gardens are church yards, hospital or recovery centers, and schools (Mission). These locations are perfect for community gardens because there is always an abundant flow of people. Gardening is therapeutic for some, a learning experience for others, but for all a place to socialize and be outside in nature. Immigrants are often drawn towards the idea of participating in community gardens because they are

able to include plants only found in their native countries. Other reasons for people opting to grow their own food are to save money, to make sure their food is free from chemicals, or to teach their children that their food shouldn't be processed multiple times on its way to their plate. (History of Community Gardens in the U.S.). Overall, community gardening is a social experience that brings diverse people together to not only garden but to teach and learn new things.

Lastly, community gardens have a positive effect on the health and mental welfare of the people they are available to. Schools use them to teach children and give them a place to exercise, play, and learn in nature (Our Mission). Elder citizens are able to reap many benefits from the gardens as well, using them for a place to pursue rest and relaxation and stay fit. Most just enjoy the time outside in nature, which is something that normally their circumstances would not allow. Studies have also shown that the presence of a community garden has increased feelings of safety and lessened crime in that area (Mission). They provide a vast amount of aid to impoverished families by letting them grow their own food, free of charge. The food grown in these gardens is grown completely natural, which will help improve the health of those citizens involved. This is an often overlooked perk to the community garden. Many gardens are started in abandoned lots in intercity districts, places that mostly the poor inhabit. Normally these people only have access to junk and processed food. These gardens give them the proper fruits and vegetables that are lacking from their diet (What We Do).

Locally in the Bay Area, there are many different ways to get involved

in community gardening. As of right now, there are a few large organizations that seem to be involved in every local community garden in the area. In San Francisco, most community gardens are run through the Recreation and Park Department. It manages more than 35 community gardens on San Francisco city property. They are allotment gardens, meaning that individuals or groups volunteer are assigned city plots. These groups then organize themselves by democratically setting laws that abide by the cities Community Garden Policy of 2006 (Home Page- Community Gardens Program). This might require the gardeners to pay dues so that the group can cover communal expenses for the gardens. San Francisco also has the Department of Public Works which uses a communal type of gardening on city property. This is different than the Recreation and Park Departments allotment gardening because community groups are responsible for setting up sites in their local area (Community Gardening). The city is also home to the San Francisco Green School Alliance, a coalition of Bay Area civic organizations that works to transform schoolyards into ecologically rich green spaces where children can learn and play. It was formed in March of 2001 and has already earned seven million dollars from the San Francisco school board both in '03 and '06 and gained recognition from the City's Commission for their efforts (Home Page- Community Gardens Program).

When it comes to urban agriculture, there are only two main organizations in the Bay Area. The Alemany Farm in San Francisco is a project run by the non-profit organization Alemany Resident Management Corporation (History of

Community Gardens). They are dedicated to improving the conditions of the Alemany Community, which is a 165 unit public housing development. In Oakland, the goal of the City Slicker Farm is to increase food self-sufficiency of the residents of East Oakland through organic and sustainable high yield urban farms and back yard gardens. Their website states that: "Our farms and gardens demonstrate the viability of a local food-production system, serve as community spaces, empower children and adults who want to learn about the connections between ecology, farming and the urban environment, and give West Oakland residents tools for self-reliance (What We Do)." I think that statement sums up the goals and positive far-reaches of community gardens not only in the Bay Area but in the United States.

The American Community Garden Association is the leading nonprofit organization working to build community by enhancing community gardening throughout the United States and Canada. The USDA and EPA are just two organizations that nationally fund community gardens (Mission). On the ACGA website, there are helpful links on how to start or join a garden as well as any other information one would need about gardening in general. Locally, there is the San Francisco Garden Resource Organization. Their website has links to every community garden in the city, as well as the urban agriculture gardens mentioned in this article. Another resource is the San Francisco Recreation and Parks. The San Francisco



Green Schoolyard Alliance is a great organization for adults to help get the youth involved in nature. If you feel like getting involved in any way with these organizations or you would like some more information, I encourage you to check out a web page or two. Remember, community gardening is not just for the poor or for children. It is a fun, fulfilling activity that fits into anyone's lifestyle.

